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MISS EDGEWORTH AS A WRITER ON EDUCATION.

BY MARY E. PORTER.

A GOOD deal of interest has been shown of late in Miss Edgeworth's writings, and some of her novels have been or are being reprinted. Few people, however, are aware that she wrote a very valuable work, called "Practical Education," on the training of children at home. It is rarely met with, for it has been long out of print, but some years ago I read a paper about it before an educational gathering in London, and it is thought the substance of what was then read would be of interest to the readers of the *Parents' Review*.

Miss Edgeworth may be described rather as a realist than an idealist in education. She had no theory to propound, no special system to illustrate, but she brought to her task that close acquaintance with children and wide sympathy with child-nature which is the beginning of wisdom in education, and she held large and liberal views of the results to be sought after in training and instructing the young.

Education was emphatically to her an art based on experimental science. And there is to my mind a special charm in her writings—the charm so real but undefinable which attaches to a sketch from nature in which every line and colour has been laid in on the spot. Some years ago I read somewhere a slight sketch of Miss Edgeworth's life at Edgeworthstown. It described her as habitually writing in a large library which was the general living room of a numerous family. And if I remember rightly the writer remarked that had the authoress written on more profound subjects, she could hardly have pursued her work successfully under the circumstances. Her work on education certainly bears the impress of the circumstances under which it was written, but, as I am inclined to think, in the way of gain rather than loss. Her views come to us with an added weight of authority from the fact that she can say, as for example in the chapter on Truth, "We do not speak here theoretically of what may be

done, we speak of what *has* been done." Yet in one point Miss Edgeworth's practical education must, I think, appear to modern thinkers on the subject distinctly unpractical. She lays down as the basis of her plans of education that the child is to be strictly guarded from any possibility of mental or moral injury through contact with others. In this I think we may trace the influence of Rousseau's ideas upon her mind, as he regarded almost every influence from the child's fellow-creatures as hurtful. Thus Miss Edgeworth insists that all necessity and all opportunity of intercourse with *servants* should be cut off. The arrangements of the house are to be such that it should be difficult for them to have access to the children's rooms. She admits that it may not be easy to get the servants to submit to their total silence and separation. "When parents," she adds, "have not sufficient firmness to prevent the interference of foolish acquaintance and sufficient prudence to keep children from all clandestine communication with servants, we earnestly advise that the children be sent to some public seminary," and this we must remember was by no means a desirable alternative in her eyes, as she regards a public school training for boys as an evil which might in some cases become a necessity. "No private education," she repeats, "can succeed without perfect unanimity, consistency, and steadiness amongst all the individuals in the family." Well may we exclaim, "Who then can be educated, according to theory?" But in truth the idea that education should be, not the privilege of the few, but the birthright of all, had hardly been grasped by Rousseau or his disciples.

No doubt in the present day children suffer much from the constant association with servants, allowed by parents too indolent or too busy to trouble themselves about their children; but such an extreme course as the one suggested by Miss Edgeworth could not now be carried out, partly, I would fain hope, because the higher moral tone of the better class of servants has rendered it less necessary, and partly because the gradual breaking down of class distinctions is tending to make such rigid lines of class separation untenable even from prudential considerations.

Miss Edgeworth writes for a class of parents who are presumed to have both the intelligence, earnest purpose, and (I may add) leisure, which would fit them to undertake the

chief direction of their children's education. The tendency of modern practice, if not theory, is to shift many of the responsibilities of the parent on to the teacher, and I sometimes fear we are moving too far in this direction, and thus doing parents and children a moral injury. To the teacher, however, who rightly estimates the importance of moral training, and who recognizes the primary importance of developing and training the mental powers of children; this work may be of great value.

In her opening chapter on toys, Miss Edgeworth recognizes play as having an important influence on the education of a child. In reading her remarks under this head we are forcibly reminded of many of Froebel's ideas, and a play-room furnished according to her suggestions would bear a striking resemblance to a Kindergarten schoolroom. Thus she says, "A boy who has the use of his limbs and whose mind is untainted by prejudice would in all probability prefer a substantial cart, in which he could carry weeds, earth, and stones up and down hill, to the finest frail coach and six that ever came out of a toy shop; for what could he do with the coach after having admired and sucked the paint, but drag it cautiously along the carpet of a drawing-room, watching the wheels which will not turn and seeming to sympathize with the just terrors of the lady and gentleman within who appear certain of being overturned every few minutes. When he is tired of this he may set about to unharness the horses, which were never meant to be unharnessed; or to comb their woollen manes and tails which usually come off during the operation." "That such toys," she adds, "are frail and useless may, however, be considered as evils comparatively small. As long as a child has sense and courage to destroy his toys there is no great harm done, but in general he is taught to set a value upon them totally independent of all ideas of utility or of any regard to his own real feelings. Either he is conjured to take particular care of them because they cost a great deal of money, or else he is taught to admire them as miniatures of some of the fine things on which fine people pride themselves." "I liked the cart best, says the boy, but everybody said the coach was the prettiest, so I chose the coach."

Among the occupations suggested for children in the same

chapter are modelling in wax or clay, the making of cardboard models of furniture and the weaving of baskets.

In speaking of the training of children in the nursery, Miss Edgeworth remarks "that when they are busily employed in trying experiments on objects within their reach, we should not, by way of saving them trouble, break the course of their ideas and thus totally prevent them from acquiring knowledge by their own experience."

Those who are anxious to check the tendency to cramming in the education of the day will find in Miss Edgeworth a strong ally. "Surely," she pleads, "it is the use which children make of their acquirements, which is of consequence, not the possessing them a few years sooner or later. A man who during his whole life could never write anything that was worth reading, would find it but poor consolation for himself, his friends, or the public to reflect that he been in joining hands before he was five years old. We are not solicitous about the quantity of knowledge that is obtained at any given age, but we are extremely anxious that the desire to learn should continually increase, and that whatever is taught should be taught with that perspicuity which improves the general understanding."

Very strongly too does the authoress insist on the importance of establishing a close connection between words and ideas in children's minds. "General terms," she says "whether in moral or natural philosophy, should, we apprehend, be as much as possible avoided in early education. General terms are, as it were, but the endorsements upon the bundles of our ideas, they are useful to those who have collected a number of ideas, but utterly useless to those who have no collections ready for classification, nor should we be in a hurry to tie up the bundles till we are sure that the collection is tolerably complete."

Miss Edgeworth was a firm believer in the truth that what the learner discovers through mental exertion is better known than what is told him. Hence she would have the instruction of children mainly carried on by means of conversation, in which their powers of thought and observation should be greatly stimulated, and interesting examples of such conversations with children are given from notes taken at the time.

Like most true thinkers on the subject of education, Miss

Edgeworth recognizes the great power placed in a teacher's hands by the law of association of ideas. "The education of children," she remarks, "is begun by those who first smile upon them." In the chapter on attention, she states "that whenever attention is habitually raised by the power of association we should be careful to withdraw all the excitements that were originally used, because these are now unnecessary; the steady rule with regard to stimulus should be, to give the least possible quantity that will produce the effect we want. Success is a great pleasure, as soon as children become sensible of this pleasure, that is to say, when they have tasted it two or three times they will exert their attention merely with the hope of succeeding. Instead of increasing excitements to produce attention, we may vary them, which will have just the same effect. When sympathy fails, try curiosity; when curiosity fails, try praise." In another place she remarks that "objects or thoughts which have been associated with pleasure, retain the power of pleasing, as the needle touched by the loadstone acquires polarity and retains it long after the loadstone is withdrawn."

In speaking of rewards and punishments, Miss Edgeworth reminds us "that unjust punishments do not effect their intended purpose, because the pain is not associated with the action which we would prohibit, but on the contrary it is associated with the idea of our tyranny, it consequently excites the sentiment of hatred towards us instead of aversion to the forbidden action." She urges that "as much as possible we should let children feel the natural consequences of their own actions." In speaking of the training of the power of judgment, Miss Edgeworth would have children carefully trained to criticism. "We have been," she pleasantly adds, "so well corrected and so kindly assisted by the observations of young critics that we cannot doubt their capacity." She expresses a wish, which I believe has not been fulfilled, that a writer equal to the task would write a book of trials for children, as exercises for their judgment, beginning with the simplest and proceeding gradually to more complicated cases in which moral reasonings can be used. Of course such a book should illustrate the general principles of justice and not introduce children to mere technical terms.

With regard to temper, Miss Edgeworth wisely remarks "that it depends much upon the understanding, and whenever we give our pupils false ideas of pleasure we prepare for them innumerable causes of discontent." "You ought to be above such things," "You ought not to let yourself be vexed by such trifles," are common expressions which do not immediately change the irritated person's feelings. The chapter on obedience, in which she was assisted by notes from Mrs. Edgeworth, abound as we might expect, in useful suggestions. "Whenever we desire a child to do anything," she says, "we should be perfectly certain, not only that it is a thing which he is capable of doing, but also that it is something we can, in case it comes to an ultimate argument, force him to do. It is best then to begin with prohibitions; with such prohibitions as you can, and will steadily persevere to enforce."

While acknowledging her obligations to Rousseau as a writer on education, Miss Edgeworth severely criticizes the want of truth and openness in his plans for dealing with children. "Children are not fools," as she remarks, "and are not to be governed like fools." In the chapter on obedience, Miss Edgeworth observes "that a false idea of the pleasures of liberty misled Rousseau." Children have not our abstract ideas of the pleasures of liberty, they do not, until they have suffered from ill-judged restraints, feel any strong desire to exercise what we call free will; liberty is with them the liberty of doing certain specific things which they have found to be agreeable; liberty is not the general idea of pleasure in doing whatever they *will* to do. Miss Edgeworth is not in favour of allowing children to have the care of animals. She alleges, what is very true, that they are apt to treat them capriciously, but adds, what we venture to doubt, that this caprice is apt to degenerate into cruelty. "They are apt," she says, "to insist on doing animals good against their will," as indeed many a much-enduring tabby and patient dog could testify had they the power of speech, but animals are, I think, often wise enough to discern real kindness hidden under strange manifestations, and generally become attached to the children with whom they associate. Although young children should not be trusted with animals excepting under supervision, I cannot

but think that the care of animals generally develops the feeling of attachment to them and may be classed among the wholesome influences connected with a child's education.

Perhaps some persons present may remember an anecdote of a German princess, concerning whom a question was asked as to what form of religion she professed, and the answer was that as yet her Highness was of no religion, as it had not been decided to whom she was to be married. I was reminded of this story when reading the chapter on female accomplishments. "Women," Miss Edgeworth says, "cannot foresee what may be the tastes of the individuals with whom they have to pass their lives. Their own tastes should not therefore be early decided; they should, if possible, be so educated that they may attain any talent in perfection which they may desire, or which their circumstances may render necessary."

In these words Miss Edgeworth probably reflects the ideas about female education current in the society of her time, and the women of the present day may well be thankful that they live in a more enlightened age, when their claim as responsible individuals to the blessings of education meets with respectful recognition from all those who are seeking to carry out social reforms.

In such a short and imperfect sketch, I have been obliged to leave out many points on which Miss Edgeworth offers valuable suggestions, but I can assure any teacher who cares to hunt out these old volumes from the libraries where they lie hidden, that they will be amply repaid by their careful perusal.

AN OLD BOOKSHELF.

BY J. H. WATT.

A SHELF of old books—some battered, dirty, almost torn to pieces; others with only the marks of time upon them, not the wear and tear of childish fingers. What memories they bring back, of winter evenings and long Sunday afternoons, when they were read, re-read, and even acted. Children, now-a-days, rarely seem to make their story-books part of their lives in the way we did long ago. They do not talk of the characters in Mrs. Molesworth's tales, as children of an earlier generation talked of Lucy and Emily Fairchild, or Anna Ross, infinitely superior though the former may be in point of literary art. For one thing, there are so very many children's books; it is perfectly bewildering to look at a modern child's bookcase, and the circulating library pervades the nursery no less than the drawing-room. Then, children are so much looked after and trained now, that few have the long hours entirely without supervision that their parents used to enjoy, and there is no time for making friends of their books, for acting scenes from them, and living, in imagination, the lives of the characters. That constant watching may be a good thing in many ways, but surely it implies that children must, sooner or later, altogether lose the power of amusing themselves without the help of a grown-up person, if a reaction to the wholesome neglect of thirty years ago does not set in before long.

Will old associations cling round these gaudy little modern books twenty years hence, as they cling round the queer, old-fashioned volumes, with their absurd pictures, and general air of long ago? Perhaps it may be a mistake for people to love their books for reasons—in some cases at least—quite apart from their literary merit but at any rate the love is there, so that even now, it is a joy to take down these volumes from their place, and once more turn the leaves and read the favourite passages.

The "Fairchild Family" is a very old friend. Could a child read it to-day with the feeling that neither the stilted language, nor the long, wearisome discussions, nor even the prayer and hymn at the end of every chapter,